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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, students taking an introductory English composition class have been encouraged to perform their research in the college or university library, but in recent years there has been a trend toward encouraging students to perform part or all of their research for composition research papers on the Internet or within an entirely electronic library. This paper explores some of the advantages and disadvantages in both traditional and online universities in encouraging college students to utilize the Internet and electronic libraries as their predominant research tool for research in English composition. Noting that the ability to perform research is a skill which improves with practice, the paper states that the research paper is traditionally assigned to teach such skills. It points out that the requirements that students use a "spread" of sources is designed to prevent them from focusing their research efforts on the sources they are already familiar with using, as well as to compel students to use more than one research source. The paper finds, however, that the who teach introductory composition courses are almost compelled to restrict students' research to electronically available sources at online universities or in some distance education classes at traditional universities. It states that instructors of online composition classes can avoid problems by choosing topics on which adequate online information exists or by not assigning a research paper. According to the paper, for online instructors who value the class research paper assignment or who are compelled by their department to assign it, there is no entirely satisfactory solution to the dilemma. (NKA)

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The Use and Overuse of Electronic Research in Freshman Composition Research Papers: Problems in Traditional and Online Universities

by Dr. Suzanne L. Abram

Most college students take a semester of English composition in their freshman or sophomore years. Frequently a research paper is a part of this composition class. Although traditionally the students taking such a class have been encouraged to perform their research in the college's library, in recent years there has been a trend toward encouraging students to perform part or all of their research for their freshman composition research paper on the Internet or within an entirely electronic library. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the advantages and disadvantages in both traditional and online universities in encouraging college freshmen to utilize the Internet and electronic libraries as their predominant research tool for a research paper in an English composition class.

The situation of the college freshman or sophomore who performs research primarily using the Internet is probably different from that of a college junior or senior, and certainly different from that of a graduate student or a faculty member. The ability to perform research is a skill which improves with practice. Faculty who allow or encourage students to use Internet sources in performing their research for their freshman composition research paper must take into account the fact that their students are inexpert researchers. In fact, the paper is traditionally assigned in part to teach research skills. The students are not expected to be knowledgeable about the finer points of using a university library.

Because freshman composition research papers are traditionally assigned to teach research skills, the instructor often chooses to make specific research assignments, i.e., that the students must use a certain minimum number of sources, or that the students must use a variety of sources. For example, the instructor may require that the students use at least one book, one journal article, one online source (electronic database or website), and three unspecified sources. The requirement that students use a "spread" of sources is designed to prevent students from focusing their research efforts on the sources they are already familiar with using, as well as to compel students to use more than one research source.

If the instructor does not specify that the students use books and journal articles as well as Internet sources, a few students are likely to try to use solely Internet sources. There are problems with this approach, especially when the students are freshman or sophomores. There is an attitude that the Internet, being a new research source, is a better research tool than books and journal articles and other sources which are older and more traditional. In its crudest form, this attitude may take the shape that an electronic encyclopedia is better than one printed on paper, since an electronic encyclopedia will probably include sound and video. On a more sophisticated level, students may reasonably believe that Internet research will find the most up-to-date sources. What such students do not consider is that, however sophisticated the electronic encyclopedia or recent online articles may be, most college libraries contain vastly more scholarly sources on paper than those that are easily available on the Web. The fact that the latest research on Topic X is online does not necessarily substitute for the fact that the most of the research on Topic X is located only in the stacks.

In extreme cases, the possibility exists that the student, having been trained to perform

electronic research but not to venture into the stacks, wishes to do electronic research because it is all he or she has learned. In other words, this student sticks exclusively to electronic research because he or she does not wish to spend the time learning how to locate and use more traditional sources. Of course, this is not inconsistent with the attitude of the student who uses electronic sources because he believes they are superior to book-based sources. The student who knows only one approach to research may believe that the approach he has learned is the best one and one which is adequate to all his needs.

Finally, some students overuse electronic sources because they are simpler to use than traditional sources. It is easier to sit at a computer terminal, to push buttons, and to read a few screens with graphics and pictures than to walk through the stacks, drag large volumes off shelves, stand in front of photocopiers, or read a three-hundred page monograph. A student's claims that she doesn't know how to do traditional research, and that electronic research is better anyway, may frequently be a cover for unwillingness to spend more than an hour or two performing research for a paper.

Generally, then, freshman composition instructors who are assigning research papers should be careful to require sources other than electronic sources unless their topic is such that electronic sources would be fully adequate. This is an issue which the instructor should consider before choosing the research topic(s) and assigning the paper.

In one particular instance, however, freshman composition instructors are almost compelled to restrict students' research to electronically available sources even when such sources will almost certainly be inadequate. This is the situation which develops at online universities, or in some distance education classes offered through traditional universities.

The problem, which is almost insuperable, is this. Students who choose to study at online universities often do so because they live significant distances from the nearest university, or because their jobs are sufficiently time-consuming that they do not have the opportunity to drive to an on-site classroom. Such students welcome distance education because they believe that it will allow them to earn a respectable degree from a respectable university without having to sacrifice a job or a home.

Universities increasingly welcome such students and offer them classes through a variety of distance education methods. But, unfortunately, these distance education students are limited–perhaps even more than they realize–in their opportunities to perform library research. Freshman composition classes, if they assign a research paper, often suggest that students perform their research through the Internet or through the campus online library or e-library. Yet the problems with this approach are manifest. First, the students will simply not learn to use books or printed journals if their research is performed solely on the Internet. Yet most scholars prefer to publish their works by traditional, printing-press, means, if only because such publications are more likely to earn the scholar tenure than electronic, non-refereed publications. Although some scholarly articles are available online, certainly these are still in the minority, and there are few scholarly monographs available online.

In addition, students in these composition classes, being freshmen or sophomores, do not always have the experience necessary to distinguish from reliable Internet sources and unreliable Internet sources. This is a problem, of course, which plagues all research to some extent. But distance education students may be peculiarly vulnerable to this problem because of the large number of unreliable sources online and the students' isolation from one another and from librarians. Although, in theory, students can confer with one another, with their instructor, and with the campus

librarian through email or the telephone, in fact the effort of sending email or making phone calls to check doubtful sources is often low on the student's priority list. A freshman composition class can be compressed into a five-week period at some online universities; such a schedule does not allow time for much checking of sources.

Instructors of online freshman composition courses, of course, can avoid these problems by adopting one of two approaches. They can choose topics on which they know adequate online information exists. Or they can choose not to assign a research paper. But both solutions are significantly flawed. Online universities attract students by offering them degree programs which are allegedly "just as good as" those in traditional universities, if not better. It would be difficult for an online university to maintain that its freshman composition class is "just as good as" the class in the local state university while at the same time admitting that a research paper is not being assigned because the students do not have access to adequate research sources. Similarly, it places stress on the online faculty to find topics on which there is adequate electronic research material that is reasonably reliable and of the proper level of sophistication. Their counterparts in a traditional university can assign nearly any topic, or allow a student to choose a topic, while safe in the knowledge that the topic can be adequately researched in the university library with the help of a reference librarian. The online faculty member does not have this luxury. And, of course, even if the information is available and the distance education student finds it, he or she has not learned what the research paper was originally designed to teach–familiarity with a wide variety of research sources. At best, the distance education student has learned to be a good online researcher. He or she would not have gained any skills at finding books or journal articles in the stacks.

Defenders of the system may argue that the online student has learned what he needs to

learn–namely, how to perform research within that online university. So long as the student does not transfer to a traditional university, he will have gained all the research skills that he needs. Presumably, the argument runs, no online instructor will ask for non-electronic sources, and so if the student learns how to find only electronic sources he will have gained the particular skills necessary for research in the online university environment. Of course, the flaw with this argument is that it assumes that the student will not transfer to a traditional university, or that he will not graduate and then attempt to do graduate work at a traditional university. Such assumptions do not seem to be prudently made. Moreover, the problem remains that the online student who has learned everything there is to know about online research may still graduate without the slightest idea of traditional research methods. His future job may require him to do research with printed books with which he has never become familiar. Again, this is not quite in keeping with the desire of online universities to portray their degrees as "just as good as" the degrees of traditional universities.

In any setting, then, but particularly in distance education, there are problems which arise in relation to the overuse of electronic research in the freshman composition research paper. In traditional university settings, the solution is comparatively simple: if a research paper is assigned, then students should be strongly encouraged to use a variety of sources. Electronic sources should probably not be ignored, but neither should they be allowed to predominate merely because they bear the halo of the most recent approach to doing research. Students should be encouraged to use a variety of research methods because Internet research does not replace book-oriented research in all areas, and it is not likely to do so in the near future. Students should be warned that a good researcher uses the research tools appropriate to his or her research subject. Different subjects require different research tools, and while some subjects are well researched using the Internet, other

subjects are not.

In distance education courses, however, the solution is not easy to see. Distance education students generally do not have easy access to traditional university libraries, and it does not seem likely that this will change. Neither is it the case that electronic sources will replace bound volumes in most areas of academic work in the near future. Faculty members are faced with the bad choice of requiring research papers that do not do a good job of teaching their students to perform research, or of not assigning a research paper at all. For the online instructor who genuinely finds little value in research papers as a teaching tool, the situation is not bad, because he can omit the research paper and not miss it. But for those online instructors who believe in the value of the research paper, or who are compelled by departmental requirements to assign one, there is no entirely satisfactory solution to the dilemma.